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ABSTRACT

Findings of a 2-year study of school-community communications are presented in this report, which analyzes the content and style of district-to-community written communiques and offers suggestions for improvement. Methodology involved document analysis of 594 written communiques from the central office and one elementary, middle, and high school in each of three school districts; teacher and administrator interviews; and community focus groups. The "Market Rating Instrument," a marketing diagnostic tool, was developed to analyze the data. Overall, the documents were characterized by a clear identification of purpose and functionality, but were not well coordinated by an overall communication strategy, were uncreative, and were usually targeted toward white middle-class parents. Three suggestions to enhance the quality of school-community communiques are to improve appearance, writing clarity, and imaginative style. Basic strategies include utilizing policy guidelines, a marketing mentality, educator writing training, information packaging, market segmentation and target marketing, nonparent marketing, and communication campaigns. Three tables are included. (20 references) (LMI)

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WRITTEN COMMUNICATION AND THE MARKETING OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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WRITTEN COMMUNICATION AND THE MARKETING OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Abstract

This article reports findings from a two-year study of school-to-community communications in which a "Market Rating Instrument" was developed and 594 school communiques were analyzed for quality and content. The findings argue the need to introduce private sector marketing techniques into the field of public education to enhance school-to-community relations.[1]

Educational institutions in America are just now awakening to the potential benefits that private sector marketing techniques afford. The ultimate benefit of educational marketing is to draw schools and their communities into mutually healthy and supportive working relationships that improve the productive capacity and quality of both (Gotts & Purnell, 1987; NSPRA, 1987; Peary, 1981; Rich, 1988).

Local public schools and the communities that surround them are bound together in a working relationship which promotes either the growth and development or decline and decay of both. Central to establishing a positive working relationship is the concept of an exchange of valued goods and services between schools and their communities. A productive and constructive exchange requires an effective school-to-community and community-to-school communication process that responds with clarity and focus to the information requirements of both (Gotts & Purnell, 1984; NSPRA, 1986; Pfeiffer & Dunlap, 1988).

The objective of this study is to develope and use a marketing diagnostic tool to analyze the quality and content of written messages going out from school

1The contents of this report were developed under the support of the California Educational Research Cooperative (CERC), a consortium of southern California school districts, county offices of education, and the University of California, School of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the views of CERC, and should not assume endorsement by that organization. The authors would like to thank CERC for its cooperation in making this study possible.

districts to their respective communities. The messages are critical because, for better or worse, they help shape perspectives about what the schools are doing and how well they are doing it (Kotler & Fox, 1985, p. 42; McElreath, 1977). If the communication items poorly represent the quality of the educational programs, processes and people, the end result can only have negative consequences for students.

This study responds specifically to the following research questions:

1. Who originates the school to community messages? Are the written documents proactive or reactive?

2. How often are the communiques translated into languages other than English?

3. Who are the target audiences?

4. How are the messages distributed?

5. What do the messages say?

6. How well are the communication items written?

7. How well are the newsletters written and designed?

Responses to these queries lead to one final question.

8. How can school-to-community written communication be improved?

In the private sector managing effective exchanges between producers and consumers has, in a large measure, been a function of the marketing process. Kotler and Fox (1985) define the marketing process as:

> the analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programs designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets to achieve institutional objectives. Marketing involves designing the institution's offerings to meeting the target markets' needs and desires, and using effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and service the markets. (p. 7)

Implicit in the process is a fundamental belief in the "marketing concept"

first described by Kotler over thirty years ago. The tenentes of the concept included an overriding orientation to meeting client expectations and needs, a realization within the organization that the client orientation is everyone's responsibility, and that the marketing goals of the organization and the organization's goals are one in the same. In the education setting, this is often a more difficult and challenging task due to the multiple goals of the organization formed by its multiple "clients."

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For one complete semester in the fall of 1989, nine schools and three central offices of three California school districts collected a sampling of their school-\district-to-community written communiques for use in this marketing study. In each district one elementary, middle, and high school participated. The districts and schools participated on a voluntary basis, and are not intended to be a random subset of California school. Rather, they represent three individual and specific case studies. All three districts have strong academic orientations and believe in sound school--community interactions.

A total of 594 written communications were collected from the 12 participating units. While there was a limited amount of "leakage" (i.e., failure to secure documents) in the collection, the only area where there was systematic underrepresentation involved the notes of teachers going home to parents about specific students. These messages were regarded as confidential. Unfortunately, missing data elementes are unevenly distributed across the collection sites, making it difficult to draw reliable inferences about the differential rates of communication by type of school unit.

In addition to collecting written documents, several dozen interviews were

held with teachers and administrators who produced the documents as well as members of the community (e.g., minority groups, parents of high achieving and low achieving students, community leaders, business officials) who received them. Focus groups were used in the community interviews (NSPRA, 1986, p. 207).

In order to identify communication patterns, the research team designed a Market Rating Instrument (MRI) to item analyze each printed communique by breaking it down into component parts. This procedure was necessary to facilitate the search for patterns. Depending on the nature of the item, some were marked on a "yes or no" basis, and others utilized a Likert-type 1 to 7 scaled score. The MRI has two major sections. The first section of the MRI covers the sources of information communicated. For example, from what source (e.g., central office, principal, PTA, teacher), how often, and in what languages were communication items sent? Also, where were the items sent (e.g., parents, business community), and how were they delivered (e.g., mail, student, press)?

The second section of the MRI involved an examination of information content which was broken down into four subsections.

> (1) *Intended Emphasis*. For each communication item, to what degree was the purpose clear, composed of routine business, request feedback, provide positive strokes, establish a directive for action, discuss school problems and policies?
>
> (2) *Writing Style and Visual Impact*. To what extent were the items jargon free, creative, courteous, detailed, eyecatching, and containing visual illustrations?
>
> (3) *Readership*. Was the item designed for a mass or specific audience, the detailed reader and/or glancer, and in a personal or newsletter format?
>
> (4) *Quality*. This final subsection described the type of printing production (e.g, handwritten, typed, word processed, desk top publishing), and gave an overall evaluation score that rated the entire communique.

The descriptive and evaluative characteristics around which the MRI was built were drawn from publications emphasizing effective marketing communication (Gotts & Purnell, 1984; Holtz, 1986; Kindred, Bagin & Gallagher, 1984; Kotler & Andreason, 1987; NSPRA, 1987). Certainly, there are no absolutes, or even firm consensus for that matter, that determine the characteristics that make up quality communication. For that we had to rely on the research literature, years of marketing experience, and the expertise of professional writers.

The MRI was field tested twice by 10 raters with language and question adjustments made to insure a high level of reliability among raters could be maintained. Once the standards were set, actual rating of the 594 communiques was carried out by one trained and skilled rater using the "brewmaster's nose" approach common in marketing. These evaluations were periodically checked by the instrument designers to insure the ratings were consistent over time with the original rating standards. The analysis and conclusions drawn form the sample are, of course, dependent on the understanding of the field of communications implicit in the instrument and in the judgment and training of the rater.

WHERE DO COMMUNIQUES COME FROM? WHERE DO THEY GO? AND HOW DO THEY GET THERE?

Not surprisingly, the superintendents who were interviewed, as well as central office administrators and school principals, all emphasized the critical need to communicate effectively and efficiently with members of their respective communities. "Practicing what they preach," educational administrators in the three districts spend long hours before the sun comes up and after it goes down communicating with individuals and groups about the great and small educational issues of the time.

The three district superintendents impressed the research team as being informed, exceptionally bright and completely dedicated to the principle of providing quality education. These leadership characteristics were important to the researchers because the data would reflect communication patterns in districts striving for quality service to the community.

Given the fact that communication with the community is a core value within each district, the fact that none of the districts have policies governing such communication is interesting. For example, policies do not exist regarding who can or should communicate with the community, how often, using what channels, in which languages, with what objectives.

A synthesis of the interviews suggest that for the most part the schools in the three districts operate in a decentralized fashion responding to communication needs and demands as they arise. One superintendent observed that the process is guided by trust in well trained and experienced principals. If problems arise anywhere in the district requiring special attention, the senior administrators are prepared to step in and help. In short, informal guidelines and a constant monitoring of potential problematic situations gives direction to the system rather than formal policies.

Who Does the Communicating?

Interestingly enough, of the 594 documents collected, the volume was relatively evenly distributed, as shown in Table 1. By far, teachers and principals accounted for most of the written documents. Over one-third of the communiques originated from some other "unknown" source. This "unknown" originator is important because if the researcher is unable to determine who is sending a document, the same would be true for the intended receipent. (It should be noted

that the communiques from the teachers are underrepresented because the research team did not collect personal notes from teachers to parents because they were considered sensitive and confidential.)

Schools	Communiques	Individuals	Communiques
Elementary	28%	Teachers	29%
J.H./Middle	23%	Principals	28%
High School	28%	Counselors	4%
Central Office	21%	PTA's	1%
		"Unknown"	33%
Total	100%	Total	100%

Table 1. Groups Initiating Written Communiques

How Systematic is the Communication?

Communication with the community is considerably more reactive than proactive, more episodic than regularized. That is, over 71 percent of the items were treating issues that had percolated to the surface at a particular moment rather than as part of a regularized program of communication. On the one hand, this episodic response pattern illustrates flexibility leading toward spontaneous problem solving. However, too heavy a reliance on episodic communication can also be problematic, as a community leader in one district pointed out,

> I serve on a steering committee for a school bond election that will possibly take place in November. One of the tasks of that committee is going to be to campaign and educate the public. Because there is so little communication between the school district and the public generally, we're starting from ground zero. Perhaps, you'll get more favorable response on bond issues and on community support if there is some on-going communication rather than when you need something--then I'm going to educate you. Education is a continuous thing.

It should be pointed out that one of the three districts has a program of regularized, quarterly reports to the entire community and quite probably contributed to a successful school bond election.

Episodic communication with parents can also run into timing problems. For example, notes home about special meetings or calls for conferences can arrive so late as to conflict with other family commitments. One parent attempted to capture the communication pattern by saying that if the school wants resources or help, the communique is planned in advance and well timed. If it is a program announcement or personal note, that is not necessarily the case.

How Often Are Communication Items Translated?

Of the communication items collected, 2.5 percent were translated into a language other than English (usually Spanish). Because the districts have no policies governing what should be translated and how, the process is ad hoc. Those items which have the greatest probability of consistent translation are accountability issues as discipline programs and suspension information.

Approximately 80 Limited English Proficiency (LEP) parents and community members (Spanish, Cambodian, Korean, Chinese) were interviewed. These parents reported an acute frustration at receiving information about their child and the school which was written in English only, a language they could not understand. Even announcements advertising English as a Second Language classes as part of an adult education program went out to the Spanish-speaking community in English. Often the students would not bother bringing communiques home because they were in English. Several parents expressed concern about signing documents and returning them to school while not knowing what they said.

Most of the LEP parents had little awareness of such things as the

curriculum their students were studying, the meaning of the grades sent home, or the procedures for contacting teachers or counselors at school. Few knew anything about extracurricular activities such as school clubs, athletic programs or artistic programs. Interestingly enough, not only did parents express an interest in wanting to know about schooling activities, but so did the communities' non-parents. Community members with no children in school seemed to consider this knowledge to be an important part of learning about their new country.

The school personnel stress the difficulty in doing more translation because there are no funds for designated translators. The already overworked staff does not have the time to take on additional duties, even if someone is qualified to do the translating, and many schools have no one qualified to translate.

What Is the Audience for the Communication Items?

Not surprisingly, parents are the principal target of communication items over other community members by a ratio of five-to-one. Interestingly enough, a large percentage of the community members without children in school expressed strong interest in the interviews in keeping informed about what is happening in the schools. One community leader pointed out:

> "[Schools] need to realize that their constituency is everyone in the district -- not to mention the rest of the city. How they run their schools affects the rest of us. Whether or not they have year-around-schools is very important to the city. Even as an employer, they are the largest employer in the city -- three times larger than any other employer in the city. They have a direct effect on the vitality of the community, and I don't think they realize that.

Two of the districts have developed systematic written communication mechanisms (other than using the press) to reach the community. Using a networking strategy, one district has identified 300 members of the community leadership structure (e.g., political, socio-economic, minority, religious) and sends

out a quarterly report informing them of the status of the educational system. The second district is relatively small and uses a saturation strategy and sends out a quarterly report to all 15,000 heads of households in the community.

How Are The Messages Sent Out?

Students carried home 52 percent of the written documents, 40 percent were mailed, 13 percent posted someplace in the community, 16 percent published in a newspaper and 23 percent delivered in some "other" fashion. These percentages, however, are not cumulative, i.e., the same document mailed to an address might well have been posted and/or published in the newspaper. This multiple method of communication was viewed in the interviews as a positive approach providing for a broader coverage.

The lower elementary schools tend to rely on sending messages home with the students, while the high schools rely more on the U.S. mail. Parents generally report that they prefer notices in the mail because children seem to have priorities beyond carrying notes home from school. However, parents also tend to recognize the cost of using the U. S. Postal Service. At one of the high schools in our sample, each mailing costs over $900.

WHAT DO THEY SAY, AND HOW WELL DO THEY SAY IT?

What Characteristics Were Emphasized in the Messages?

Upon analysis, the 594 written documents revealed the following content-related characteristics. (The percentages are not cumulative, and a single document may contain more than one characteristic.)

- 97% had a clearly stated purpose.
- 91% dealt with routine school or district business.
- 43% reported short-term policy issues (e.g., something new and

significant to happen during the current school year); 47% did not discuss policy questions; and 10% mentioned long-term policy initiatives (e.g., something to happen during the next school year and beyond).

- 47% requested some form of action on the part of the receiver (e.g., attend a meeting), while 24% of this total directed action to be taken (e.g., sign and return a form or the student will not be able to go on a field trip, or a student must have shots before registration).

- 25% introduced information about problems the schools were confronting (e.g., low test scores, finances, discipline).

- 26% contained "positive strokes," that is, introduced language praising or recognizing the accomplishments of parents, students, PTA members, etc.

With respect to the content issues, educators reported that they are pleased to write about policy issues involving new programs that are beginning or about to begin. However, discussions of longer term policies on the development of the school and its programs are infrequent -- perhaps because most planning in education takes place on a year-to-year basis and rarely leads to general policy communication. What they do not like to do is write about are problems a specific school is having. Writing about problems, it was often argued, can contribute to shaping a negative image about a school.

Many of the parents interviewed stated rather emphatically that they wanted to know about the problems their student's school was confronting and how the school was dealing with these issues. Parents pointed that from their reading of documents carried home by students, one got the impression that the schools are nearly perfect.

Obtaining feedback from the community is not easy; it is often discouraging. Using tear-off slips attached to documents requesting feedback does not prove to be very productive. One district sends out at least 15,000 community reports every

quarter with tear-off sheets for feedback. On the average, about eight or ten replies are returned.

In fact, as a general rule, the teachers and administrators report having almost no idea about how many people read their communiques or the impressions formed thereafter. About the only way the educators know a message is getting out is by counting the house at a meeting after a message has been sent home.

How Well Are The Materials Written?

Nine items were rated on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 7 with the highest being on the positive end of the scale. The means and standard deviations for these items are presented in Table 2. Ninety-seven percent of the documents contained a clear purpose, but only 20 percent were rated toward the top of the scale as "very clearly" written. Part of the problem is the insider "jargon" educators are prone to use in their writing, (e.g., Ginn series, partnership, SES, SIP, and host of other acronyms) plus the tendency to produce their work in a rush against the clock. The full range of documents, however, approximated a normal distribution from "unclear" to "very clear" with a mean of 3.893.

The quality of writing or mechanics (based on grammar, sentence structure, syntax, spelling and punctuation), also approximates a normal distribution with a mean of 4.082. At the extremes of the scale, 4 percent were rated as representing "high quality" writing and 1 percent "low quality."

When rating the level of creativity used in the written communiques, a surprising 46 percent were at the bottom of the scale and deemed "dry and boring" while less than one percent were at the top judged to be "creative and interesting". Equally thought provoking is that is the fact that 5 percent were written in a gracious\courteous\thoughtful style, while 44 percent did not reflect these

qualities. The data seem to suggest that there is an almost singular intent on transmitting information, with limited attention given to concerns about capturing and holding the interest of readers.

In the private sector, the direct mail approach is highly dependent on creative presentations to capture the attention of busy people. "Copywriters estimate that they have only four seconds to get the consumer's attention with direct mail." Of the total volume of mail arriving at the home, an estimated 44 percent land in the trash unopened (Smolowe, 1990, p. 64).

Item	Mean	SD
Clearly Written	3.893	.883
Quality of Writing*	4.082	.839
Creatively Written*	1.992	1.243
Gracious/Courteous*	2.762	1.280
Detail Depth*	3.697	1.044
Layout Quality*	4.303	1.075
Eyecatching Layout*	3.541	1.179
Illustrations *	1.311	1.483
Overall Quality	4.096	.841

Table 2. Nine Rating Variables

Note. [(Scale: 1 = low quality to 7 = high quality); * Denotes items used in the factor analysis procedure, discussed subsequently in this paper.]

Educators depend on a captive audience of parents reading school communiques, although the interviews revealed almost complete uncertainty exists regarding how many of the parents (e.g., fathers and\or mothers, high and\or low income parents, voters and\or nonvoters) read how much of the material. Another unknown is the level of attraction these communiques have for non-parents.

The depth of detail included in the writing is usually sufficient to the task. Following a normal distribution, only 1 percent of the documents presented "more

than enough" detail and 5 percent "insufficient" detail.

The layout quality involves such things as the distribution (layout attractiveness) and accessibility (presentation of quick overview) of information on the page. The evaluation of the layout also fell within a normal distribution with a 3.541 mean.

While the information on the educational documents may be accessible, as a whole the documents are neither eyecatching nor make good use of illustrations, and few are adequately formatted to meet eye movement patterns. An eyecatching document is one that uses different boldness in type and tends to balance the page with white space, print, column configurations and illustrations in an aesthetically pleasing, pleasant manner. As a positive note, a few more than half used headlines as attention grabbers. However, very few of the documents used illustrations (pictures, drawings or graphs) to capture attention and detail information to insure that even the "glancer" has captured the intent of the document.

Are School Newsletters Well Written and Presented?

A Gallup Poll (Gallup & Elam, 1988, p. 43) reports that the majority of adults with no children in school tend to rely on newspapers (55%) for information to evaluate the quality of local schools. However, parents with students in school tend to rely on their own children and printed material, with the newsletter as a primary information link (Cattermole & Robinson, 1985; Melaragno, 1981, Stough, 1982). That was certainly the case represented in the parent interviews.

The newsletters at the elementary school level tend to be written by PTA parent volunteers. They produce a draft that is reviewed (for information content rather than presentation quality) by the principal before being released. Because parent involvement wanes as their children's years in school increase,

administrators tend to become more directly involved in producing the newsletters at the junior high or middle school level. At the high school it tends to become a principal's newsletter. The principal often invites someone within the school to gather information from teachers and administrators to put in the publication. At the district level the newsletter (district report) is the superintendent's product.

Parallelling the shift of authorship is a shift in production quality. At the lower school levels the newsletters are often rough affairs produced on typewriters, then pasted together for a photocopy reproduction. At the superintendent's level district reports are often professional productions with high quality layouts and art reproduced by desk top publishing and printed commercially.

At the elementary, middle, and high school levels parents and educators were quite clear in the interviews that the newsletters are amateur productions with a lot of untrained, volunteer help contributing to the final product. The people involved change frequently, thus contributing to the uneven quality of newsletters. Parents, though, are quick to point out that they do not expect professional quality in their school newsletters, though.

A natural consequence of untrained writers and editors producing newsletters, however, is that they tend to produce material for people just like themselves. That is, people with similar information needs and interests. For example, when interviewing members of a PTA Board that produces the school newsletter, the woman in charge commented:

> Most of us on the board are home oriented; we don't work. We think about people like ourselves when we produce the paper. We assume people are interested in things we are interested in. When you don't know what their problems are, you can't write about them. A social worker would be great on our [writing] staff.

Based on the document analysis and interviews, the research team

concluded that the people who produce newsletters tend to address the information needs of the active, participating, upwardly-mobile, middle-class parents who seek out information in the newsletter even when it is poorly presented. Often these are the same parents who attend PTA, the booster club, cheer at football games, call principals by first name, and have children who are doing well in school. When asked about the type of information these active parents look for in the newsletter, typically they reply that they search for information related directly to their own child, such as honor roll, club activities, sports write ups, classroom events. Newsletters tend to reflect these characteristics: they overflow with student recognition, and take on a "we're number one" quality. Certainly, there is no problem with this expression of pride.

At the high school level these upwardly-mobile parents are especially interested in information associated with college: application deadlines, SAT exams, scholarships, and so forth. The newsletter is a natural vehicle for this type of information as an examination of contents reveals.

Parents of less successful or at risk children, especially those from lower socio-economic levels, pointed out that school newsletters have little information about their situation and needs; therefore, these communiques are of no special importance. In talking with these parents, they seem to function in a world with distinct information needs. "A lot of the newsletter focuses on kids on honor roles," one parent offered an observation frequently heard, "and my child is not going to be on it. I would look for information about gangs and tips about how to handle such things."

These parents stress that they want to know more about how to get some kind of help for their kids who are not succeeding in school. They would like what

one parent called, "survival skill information." That is, information on how to cope with things as substance abuse, negative influence of peer pressure, dress colors in school, walking home through a tough neighborhood, harassment from other students on campus, and so forth.

Because these parents get most of their information from their children rather than official school documents, it is easy for them to accept rumors or have unwarranted fears. However, parents of at risk or low achieving children sometimes seem to know a lot more about what is going on in a school than parents who depend on a "we're number one" newsletter for their information.

Limited English proficiency parents also receive minimal benefit from newsletters which are not translated. This is significant because some of the schools have as many as 20 or 30 percent LEP parents.

The point made by many minority, poor and LEP parents is that they often have distinct information needs. As a communication instrument, they point out, the school newsletter could be segmented with a few columns written toward fulfilling different information needs of distinct populations. Market segmentation is a key component in any marketing strategy as it provides for efficiency and effectiveness in targeting specific information for specific audiences (Bagin, 1981; Swinehart, 1979; Kotler & Fox, 1985).

The entire newsletter need not be translated, although some schools, outside of the schools in our sample, do this routinely. Many LEP parents said they would be happy to see even a column or two in their own language addressing some issue of importance to them. If for no other reason, that would show the school cared.

SUMMING UP

How might the information communiques sent out by our sample schools be characterized? On the one hand their distinct purposes tend to be clearly identified and as mechanisms of communication they tend to be quite functional. That is, basic information, both routine and policy oriented, flows out from senders to receivers through numerous channels on a relatively flexible, reactive basis.

On the other hand, the communiques tend not to be well coordinated by any form of overall plan or communication strategy. In addition the communiques tend to be dull, devoid of interesting style and creative language, written almost exclusively in English, and, as far as newsletters are concerned, targeted toward a generic, upwardly mobile, white, middle-class parent. It should be noted that these patterns by no means represent all the communiques analyzed (although they do represent the significant majority).

Interestingly enough, the research team knows the sample schools to be strong educational institutions representing high standards of academic excellence. However, the communication documents do not reflect the schools' style and personality that we know them to possess.

A few of the messages, however, struck the researchers as well designed, witty, caring, insightful and interesting to read. Certainly, while those messages undoubtedly took some time to draft, they demonstrated the point that good writing about education is very possible and reflects favorably on the institution that produces it.

So what can producers of school documents do to introduce more "quality" into their communiques? That is the subject of our last section in which we address market segmentation and target audiences.

HOW CAN SCHOOL-TO-COMMUNITY COMMUNICATION ITEMS BE IMPROVED?

Briefly, the quantitative data generated by the rating instrument identifies the special characteristics of school communiques that contribute to the presence of quality in written communication. The qualitatiave data gathered via interviews and focus groups suggest that educational systems might more effectively segment their audience and address more precisely the specific information needs of each segment. That is, shift from more emphasis from mass communication to targeted communication which is relevant and "reader friendly." Turning to the quantitative data, the seven variables in the MRI that examined the actual writing of communiques were factor analyzed to determine if there were interrelationships among them that would lead to a the creation of latent variables (factors). From the MRI's list of nine rating items (see Table 2), seven were chosen for inclusion in the factor analysis: Quality of Writing, Creatively Written, Gracious/Courteous, Detail Depth, Layout Quality, Eyecatching Layout, and Illustrations. The item listed as Overall Quality was not included because it is a summative evaluation considering all items taken together. Also, the item Clearly Written was found to be so highly correlated to the Quality of Writing, that it did not add any explanatory power. Therefore, Clearly Written was dropped, and Quality of Writing was more narrowly redefined as Writing Mechanics when the MRI was revised.

Three conceptually sound factors were produced from among the seven variables used. The three factors accounted for 34 percent of the overall variance among written doucments. This indicates that a relataively high level of the MRI measures of actual writing quality can be successfully viewed as coming from three

independent underlying factors of quality. We were able to label the new latent variables or factors according to the combination of loadings relative to each variable.

As Table 3 indicates, Factor 1 is called Appearance with the variables "Quality of Layout," "Eyecatching Layout," and "Illustrations," all loading heavily. We labeled Factor 2 Writing Clarity, with the variables "Mechanics" and "Depth of Detail" loading heavily, here. Factor 3 was labeled Imaginativeness, with the variables "Creative Language" and "Gracious/Courteous" loading heavily.

Variables	FACTORS		
	Appearance	Writing Clarity	Imaginativeness
Mechanics	.18	**.81***	.05
Creative Language	.35	.03	**.75***
Gracious & Courteous	-.10	.27	**.81***
Depth of Detail	-.04	**.78***	.19
Quality of Layout	**.83***	.35	-.06
Eyecatching Layout	**.91***	.06	.06
Illustrations	**.71***	-.22	.37

Table 3. Factor Loadings [(Rotated Factor Matrix); * Donotes items loading on each factor]

Hence, because educators want to reflect the quality of their educational system in the quality of the written communication that discusses it, our data suggest a simple message. That message is: There are three independent ways to improve the quality of school-to-community communiques -- improve the

document's Appearance, Writing Clarity, or Imaginative Style. We know this because items with higher overall scores on the seven variables that make up the three factors got their high scores in three independent ways -- by improving appearance, writing clarity or imaginativeness. The factors tell us that improvement on each of these dimensions is independent of the other, i.e., that some items were imaginative without being clear or skillful, some were attractive without being imaginative, and so on.

WHAT BASIC STRATEGIES CAN BE EMPLOYED?

In order to improve the quality of school communiques, various suggestions derived from the research literature and the interviews could prove valuable.

Policy Guidelines. The interview data suggest the importance of establishing policy guidelines that give broad definition to issues of who is to communicate what, to which audience, how often, and in what language. Without such policies all too often in the hustle and bustle of busy people hard at work, the communication system suffers. One insightful community leader put his finger on the problem.

> I'd like to say just for the record that schools have always been asked to do a lot more than they are prepared to do, than they are equipped to do, or that they should do. That doesn't absolve them from the responsibility of communicating with the public but it's been my experience as an observer of the scene that teachers and schools are supposed to do everything with kids from teaching them to eat a good breakfast, or feeding them one at school, to telling them to stay off of drugs, and somewhere in there they have to teach them--give them an education. And as the population grows, as technology increases, as demands are made on them, they are asked to do more and more. It is almost a losing battle.

Preparing policies that give definition and direction to the ever increasing demands on the communication process can in a large measure increase planned coverage

and effectiveness while decreasing the episodic and ad hoc communication tendencies.

Marketing Mentality. Within any educational organization a state of mind needs to be promoted which emphasizes that every employee, from the secretarial pool to the superintendent, is on the marketing team. Every message that goes out to the public contributes in some measure to the public perception about the quality of the school system.

Training. Educators have been trained to write clearly, which our data reveal. However, they have not been trained to write in a marketing context that can capture interest and stimulate action in a relatively disinterested public. Through the investment of some training time, conventional marketing techniques involving writing style, information presentation, and reproduction formats are well within the capability of educators who are interested in reaching more effectively their publics.

Information Packaging. The packaging issue has in many ways been solved in recent years by the introduction of desk top publishing. User friendly software programs (e.g., eye catching mastheads, logos, varied-size headlines, multiple columns, graphics, illustrations) make quick and easy work of newsletters and other complex documents.

Market Segmentation and Target Marketing. Private sector organizations recognize that particular segments of the public have special needs and can be addressed through appropriate message development and selection of channels. Educational organizations tend to use mass communication approaches which are cheaper, but far less affective. By diagnosing the community composition, establishing multiple mailing lists, (e.g., retired, professional, vocational, business,

alumni, at risk, special needs, LEP) and targeting specific groups with well defined messages, educational systems can increase the effectiveness of their communication processes significantly.

Non-Parent Marketing. Educational institutions can benefit in the long run by sustained efforts to inform non-parents about the quality, needs, benefits and problems associated with the local schools. At a national level a recent Gallup Poll (Gallup & Clark, 1987, p. 29) reported that only 15 percent of the public without children in school felt well informed about public schools in America. These communication efforts enhance the possibility of community support when special demands such as bond elections are presented before the voting public.

Communication Campaigns. Given the critical role educational systems play in any city, several respondents argued the importance of planned, coordinated, and collaborative campaign efforts being made by the private and public sector organization (e.g., law enforcement, business community, retired persons, health services, social welfare, churches) to confront common problems (e.g., drug abuse, gang suppression, help for the homeless, AIDS education, environment protection). One community leader phrased the need this way:

> A subcommittee of the city and the school district could be formed to meet on a regular basis to map out areas in which they could work together and ... enhance each other's position. And serve the community far better [in doing so]. The subcommittee should report to somebody. Don't just leave it out there hanging. They should come back with a recommendation to do something.

After studying the complexities and importance of school -community communication, the research team came to the conclusion that every school district could benefit by employing a communication official who has the training and skill to meet the communication challenges all districts face. Such an

individual would take a significant load off the shoulders of the chief educational officers of the district who could then devote more time to other activities. Interestingly enough, no major corporation the size of any large school district would dream of going without someone to perform this role.

In sum, the schools as large, complex organizations have always had to face a formidable problem in communicating with communities that possess diverse populations and distinct expectations. Certainly that task is getting more complicated with each passing year. However, as improvements in marketing techniques and technology become increasingly accepted in educational circles, the quality of school-to-community communication can also increase.

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